

AZOH: Iran's biggest lake said to be in danger from dams and causeway.

A group of environmental activists gathered at Lake Urmia on the 13th day of the Persian new year – April 2 – a day when it is customary for Iranians to spend time with nature. Some poured water into the lake from bottles and pitchers in a symbolic move to protest against what they call the inaction of the authorities about the lake drying up.

Police moved in to break up one group of protesters who gathered on the recently-constructed bridge over the lake, local sources said. Some reported that police used tear gas to disperse the crowd.

Environment campaigners say construction of dams on rivers that feed the lake as well as a recently built causeway across the narrowest part of the vast lake have reduced water levels and its circulation and increased salinity, jeopardising animal and marine life.

Unofficial websites close to the government either denied the police raid on protesters or claimed that the gathering was one of Azeri separatists rather than environmental activists.

The lake is Iran's biggest inland body of water and one of the saltiest lakes in the world. UNESCO has

registered it as a Biosphere Reserve and it is listed as a wetland of international importance under the 1971 Ramsar Convention.

With a surface area of about 464,000 hectares, the lake is a national park and Iran's Department of Environment, DOE, is responsible for its maintenance and protection.

The lake has 102 islands and is reputed to have therapeutic properties. It is an important habitat for birds and sealife including a unique crustacean called *Artemia urmiana*.

According to Dr Shahrokh Hakimkhani, a member of the faculty of natural resources at Urmia university, the maximum depth of the lake has fallen from 12 to six metres. One important reason for this is the drought that began in 1997. However, Hakimkhani believes the lack of efficient water management is also a serious threat to Lake Urmia.

At present, there are about 20 dams either completed or under construction on the rivers that feed the lake, which considerably reduces the amount of water flowing into it. The water is abstracted for irrigation and drinking water and some experts believe the amount is excessive.

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According to Hassan Abbasnejad, the director general of the West Azarbaijan DOE office, salt levels in the lake have reached 340 grammes per litre, way above the level of 180 to 220 g per litre regarded as normal.

Masoumeh Ebtekar, a former DOE head and now a member of the Tehran city council, wrote in her blog that she had corresponded with state organisations including the energy ministry – which is responsible for building dams in the country – on determining the amount of water the lake should receive and its protection as a natural habitat. While a memorandum of understanding, MoU, was finally signed during the time that she was head of the DOE, environmentalists believe the content of the MoU has never been executed.

Lake Urmia is located in a major agricultural and industrial area and a lack of government supervision or proper sewage system means many factories pour industrial waste into the lake.

Campaigners say the real threat was first posed when the government decided to finish a project to build a 130-kilometre road, a major part of which crosses the lake. The initial stages of the project were completed nearly 30 years ago but it was never seriously followed up until 2000.

Much of the road across the lake is a causeway on an earth and stone embankment with a 1,276 km bridge in the middle, which campaigners say is not enough to permit water to flow properly.

To build the foundation of the road, millions of tonnes of rock and earth were brought from nearby mountains.

The bridge, costing 120 million US dollars, was inaugurated by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2008 and has greatly reduced the road distance between the two important cities of Tabriz and Urmia. A second phase widening the road and adding a railway is under way.

According to Dr Esmail Kahrom, an environmentalist, the embankment created for the causeway prevents the natural flow of water in the lake. The government, however, denies that the crisis of the lake's ecosystem is in any way related to the project.

One week after the protests around Lake Urmia, Ahmadinejad held an emergency meeting to assess the situation. It was decided at the meeting to transfer water from another region to the Lake. It is not clear how this would be done, but Iran has previously conveyed water long distances by making tunnels, pipes and artificial rivers.

Ahmadinejad also proposed laying pipes beneath the causeway over the lake to allow the flow of water between the two sides of the road.

Former DOE head Ebtekar said she had never agreed to the completion of this road, but after a new head took office following Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 there was no more opposition to the project.

Fatemeh Vaez Javadi, the DOE head under Ahmadinejad's government, in October 2008 blamed the United States and China for Lake Urmia drying up, saying that these two countries were the main emitters of greenhouse gases.

"The problem is far greater than a lake drying up," said an environmentalist who believes projects like dams, roads, refineries, ports and power plants are carried out in Iran without environmental impact assessments.

The Sivand and Karoun dams, a road in the Golestan National Park and the Bamoo National Park in Fars, an oil refinery in the forested province of Mazandaran and a gas separation plant near the Shadegan wetlands in Khuzestan Province are cited as examples of government construction projects that have been developed without taking into consideration environmental factors.

But the situation around Lake Urmia is still regarded by campaigners as a major disaster and they hope that the fact that government is taking some notice proves to be a good sign.

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<http://iwpr.net/report-news/campaigners-fear-lake-urmia-drying>